

Integrated Studies: A Few Reservations

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The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) would like to see more interdisciplinary studies in higher education. This charge has been taken up in general education reform. In a report advocating “High Impact” practices, the AACU urges universities to move away from “the older idea of core curriculum” to “a vertically organized general education program that includes advanced integrative studies” and programs that “combine broad themes—e.g., technology and society, global interdependence—with a variety of curricular and cocurricular options for students.” Encouraging “integration of learning across courses...to involve students with ‘big questions’ that matter beyond the classroom,” it is also anxious to generate “learning communities [that] explore a common topic...through the lenses of different disciplines.” Some of these “learning communities” should “deliberately link ‘liberal arts’ and ‘professional courses.’”¹

A “Real World” Pedagogy

Several things are noteworthy in AACU’s expression of enthusiasm for interdisciplinary education. First is its assumption that there should be more emphasis on the “big questions that matter beyond the

¹George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008), 9–10, https://keycenter.unca.edu/sites/default/files/aacu_high_impact_2008_final.pdf.

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classroom.” This is a perplexing phrase, since most professors probably already believe that the classroom is the proper venue for exploring big questions, and that such exploration thrives there in ways it can’t outside the classroom. Of course, what the AACU is advocating is an education more involved in the “real world” (a phrase that appears increasingly in the manifestos of general education programs that have adopted high impact practices). The university should be less insular. Free young scholars from their seclusion within ivied walls, the report seems to say; introduce them to people in the real world, make use of that brain that has been stewing purposelessly in isolation.

A liberal arts education, the report emphasizes, should also contribute more to the student’s career path than it has. Make the students’ coursework more relevant to their professional goals by linking core courses to professional courses—an idea that is rapidly gaining ground in general education reform. At the University of Miami, for example, students are encouraged to explore professional schools in its interdisciplinary general education program, “Cognates.” In its promotional materials for Cognates, the university finishes its rather fuzzily idealistic summary of the program on something of a dissonant utilitarian note when it promises students the chance to “mix your loves, curiosities, concerns and career explorations.”²

This new celebration of a more practical interdisciplinary learning, as the AACU defines it, works in tandem with the new economic situation of colleges and universities. Higher education, we all know, has greatly outstripped the pace of regular inflation in setting its costs. Students and their parents have responded to these extraordinary cost increases by demanding a curriculum that is more tied to the “real world,” more evident in its effect, more likely to advance students’ careers. The AACU’s recommendations answer these demands. These ideas, then, are likely driven by economic necessities as well as by scholarly ideals.

These are all useful ideas, but they also go against the grain of much of what has traditionally and uniquely defined academia—the study of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, divorced from utilitarian goals, for example, or the notion of academia as a retreat from the way of the world rather than a means of making that way more efficient and comfortable.

²“Cognates Program of General Education,” University of Miami, <http://admissions.miami.edu/undergraduate/academics/cognates-program/index.html>.

An Odd Cure

Interdisciplinary practices can seem like an odd remedy for the problems that ail general education today. General education programs are in tatters. Core courses have become more and more specialized, resulting in a final general education experience often comprised of a patchwork of disparate courses. AP credits allow the students to hollow the experience of core curriculum by testing out of a large proportion of their credits. Most general education programs are further weakened by their labyrinthine nature. So many credits from here are needed, so many from there. AP credits can be applied here but not there. This course satisfies a professional school's requirement, that one doesn't. To navigate the typical general education program is akin to cracking an arcane algorithm. And the guides schools provide to help students navigate these programs are neither clear nor helpful. Students often pass through their core studies unsure of why they are taking the courses they do or what they all add up to.

What is most urgent in general education reform is greater simplicity and coherence—a clearly organized program of coursework whose scope, requirements, and electives are conveyed in direct, energetic language that excites students about their learning opportunities. Offering a solution to the maelstrom of general education via an interdisciplinary curriculum that is even wider-ranging, more open and messy, more difficult to corral, given even more to obscure and elaborate descriptions, seems contradictory to the needs at hand. Students at the University of Rochester, for example, who are trying to navigate the interdisciplinary section of their general education requirements, entitled “Clusters,” are directed to a “Cluster Search Engine,” within which they will discover three subordinate search queries and seven “search suggestions,” the last of which is “additional searching techniques.”³ Adding interdisciplinary components—not to mention all the other favored high impact ideas: internships, group activity, service learning, etc.—to the already complex algorithm of general education transcends confusion and becomes a symbol for the fractured consciousness of modern man.

The language with which interdisciplinary practices are delivered in general education does not alleviate this confusion. General education programs that

³Cluster Search Engine,” University of Rochester, Office of the Registrar, <https://secure1.rochester.edu/registrar/CSE/>.

ramp up interdisciplinary and cluster studies are predisposed to use vague techno-language that is as uninspiring to students as it is dispiriting to scholars. For example, a freshman navigating Stanford University's relatively new "breadth requirements" is directed to choose courses from such categories as the "Thinking Matters Requirement" or "Ways of Thinking/Ways of Doing."⁴ Within the "Thinking Matters" component they push on to select courses from "Immersion in the Arts: Living in Culture (ITALIC)" or "Structured Liberal Education (SLE)."⁵ If the rather unpoetic titles aren't a giveaway, the use of acronyms certainly is. This is the bland language of "edspeak," advertising sloganeering, and corporate branding. This is language that moves a scholar to tears, but which, even more significantly, can only make a student smirk. Students have encountered this kind of tortured reinvention of educational terms from kindergarten on and are highly sensitive to its desperation, the comic futility of its effort to make education more relevant to a jaded clientele. I don't think it is hopelessly reactionary to suggest that students might be more attracted to a class simply titled "French Symbolist Poetry" or "Newtonian Physics" than by one called "Thinking Matters."

The general education curriculum needs greater clarity and specificity, a stripping away to revive the meaning of the university, not the addition of blandly titled courses that further bury that meaning. Contemporary education revisionists seem bent on roiling and muddying the waters of general education. And they seem strangely embarrassed by their own objects of study—certain that they hold no interest to students unless they are repackaged in contemporary language. Ironically, it's this language that students find most comical and off-putting.

Adding interdisciplinary coursework to general education is also an odd recommendation when we consider the nature of the contemporary student. Students arrive at college already suffering from a jangled, frenzied experience of culture, typified, for example, by their use of *Wikipedia* and other online sources that cover a wide bandwidth but remain dismayingly superficial. If any cohort needs a program characterized by discipline of depth rather than breadth of study, it's the current generation of college students. They need to be introduced to the freedom inherent in restraint, to the depth of knowledge that arises from limiting interests, to the increased subtlety and sophistication of

⁴"General Education Breadth Requirements," Stanford University, <https://registrar.stanford.edu/students/enrolling-courses/general-education-breadth-requirements>.

⁵"Thinking, Matters," Stanford University, General Education Breadth Requirements, <https://registrar.stanford.edu/students/enrolling-courses/general-education-breadth-requirements/thinking-matters>.

thought that develops when disciplining the mind to delve into, rather than wander through, a particular base of knowledge.

A Difficult Pedagogy

Interdisciplinary classes and projects are also not easy to realize. They often begin in a riot of professorial creativity. Professors are particularly adept at, and excited by, finding ingenious connections between diverse ideas and fields of inquiry and often warm to the challenge, as the scholar Casaubon does in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, of discovering macroscopic keys to learning. But these courses often fall victim to their own ambition. The challenge is to shape wide-ranging ideas into a sensible series of classes. Often the courses that look best on paper are the first to disintegrate in real time. Such courses require considerable forethought and follow-through, which often fall by the wayside when the hectic race of the academic quarter begins.

An academic quarter is a very small amount of time to squeeze in a large variety of subjects or, in the case of team-taught courses, a variety of disciplines and their advocates. Students' heads spin at the procession of professors who present their favorite party pieces but don't always clarify how those pieces fit within the coursework. Papers assigned in these courses ask students to satisfy the radically different criteria of separate disciplines or, just as often, are too focused and reductive. Coursework that is meant to broaden horizons instead herds students down narrow paths to predetermined points of comparison rather than allowing them to draw their own comparisons among the subjects studied.

These courses are also high maintenance and, like so many contemporary academic and pedagogical innovations, contribute to administrative bloat. Universities increasingly focus on incorporating interdisciplinary courses and capstone projects into their general education programs. Some require projects that bring students together from different disciplines, even different professional schools. This is interdisciplinary education on an industrial scale. The logistics behind these programs are massive and lead to increased hiring of administrative staff. And so we arrive at the interesting phenomenon of administrations advocating for programs (integrated studies advertise nicely in promotional materials) that actually bolster their own standing in the university.

In actuality, the academic quarter remains a relatively short period of time more ideally suited to a tightly focused field of study. The title, "Introduction to

Shakespeare,” may not scintillate, but the student who takes this course will likely walk away better informed than one who takes, for example, “Shakespeare and Community,” currently offered by the University of Wisconsin–Madison. There are several reasons for a student to be wary of this course, which “begins as a Massive Open Online Course but...is also a massive public digital humanities event.”⁶ One is the team of professors’ disavowal of any expertise. “We will not be serving as talking head ‘experts,’” the course creators hasten to emphasize. Another is their curiously malleable notion of Shakespeare: “Our goal is not to teach you what we know about Shakespeare, but to help each of you find your Shakespeare.” But the most significant reason students should be wary of this course (and the one closest to our discussion of integrated studies) is that they will be so busy considering “what it is for us to discover and un-cover Shakespeare in the digital age” that they will get around to reading only *four* of Shakespeare’s plays. Students enrolled in “Introduction to Shakespeare,” meanwhile, stand a better chance of reading more than that. And when you put Shakespeare, professors, and students in one room, Shakespeare still has the advantage—despite being dead, despite the far-reaching mind of the professor, despite the dazzling technology available to students—of being the smartest guy in that room. Bring Shakespeare into the world, by all means, but don’t forget to bring the world to Shakespeare.

A Bias toward the Sciences

AACU’s trumpeting of integrative and interdisciplinary learning reveals a bias toward a curriculum that highly favors the sciences, social science in particular. This is clear in the “broad themes” recommended for interdisciplinary projects such as “technology and society” and “global interdependence.” Interdisciplinary practices perpetually favor concern with the social and political problems of modern society. There is no reason for this. One can easily conceive of interdisciplinary projects involving a study of the past rather than the future, say a group of students and professors drawn from diverse fields to explore the creation, nature, and purpose of Gothic cathedrals. But such projects are rare. The interdisciplinary projects found most often in high impact practices tend to

⁶“Shakespeare in Community,” University of Wisconsin–Madison MOOCs, <https://moocs.wisc.edu/mooc/shakespeare-in-community/>.

model the Silicon Valley notion of group entrepreneurial work that aims to solve a contemporary problem. This bias toward interdisciplinary work that “solves problems” in the “real world” reflects, more generally, the dominance in the contemporary university of an Enlightenment-based conception of societal progress, the belief in the amelioration of the human situation within a linear historical time—a faith, by the way, not shared by many of the most ancient and venerable belief systems traditionally taught in the university. Nor by many of the most stimulating modern world views, for that matter.

The curriculum isn't the only part of campus in thrall to the latest social currents. Terrified by the increased threat of litigation and of public shamings in the press, college and university administrations are constantly preoccupied with their responsibilities vis-à-vis an array of human rights issues, all of which are discussed in mind-numbing detail in faculty meetings—meetings that, years ago, used to concern pedagogy and the classroom. The classroom barely registers in these meetings now, nor does it seem of much concern to an administrative staff convulsed by aspects of their students' social life, aspects they seek, increasingly, to involve professors in as well. The bulk of administrative communication with faculty focus on student life and rights issues: a professor's responsibility regarding an assault victim, special needs in testing, the language a professor can use before students, the correct way to deal with a student with concussion issues, sensitivity with respect to students' medication or their gender—whatever the op-ed pages deem of preeminent importance today. As these issues inundate the faculty meeting, they trickle into the classroom. Today's professor feels a constant pull from the administration, from the students, even from other faculty, to justify the worth of their courses by their relevance to that holy of holies, social commitment. And that pull manifests in AACU's advocacy for “advanced integrative studies” that turn their attention to “technology and society” and “global interdependence.”

It is humanities professors who gripe most about the movement toward practices that the AACU has decided to gather under the rather assertive banner of “high impact” because these practices so value the sciences that they tend to disregard the traditional role of the humanities in academia. Whereas high impact practices seek to delve into the future, to innovate and improve the human situation, the humanities often concentrate on the past and the university's role as curator of that past. While high impact practices stress change, the humanities are often concerned with what it considers timeless aspects of the human situation. Whereas high impact practices emphasize the

progress of society, the humanities also focus on, perhaps even more often, the progress of the soul. Whereas high impact practices are dedicated to the unboundedness of human innovation, the humanities advocate humility and often reflect on the inescapable obstacles to societal progress: human perversity, our attraction to self-destruction, our tendency to use even our greatest accomplishments for nefarious purposes. High impact practices celebrate technology; the humanities approach technology with great caution. There may in fact be a few things that a highly motivated cross-disciplinary group of people in an innovative think tank cannot change or improve. And it may be important to reflect a great deal on what those things are.

Conclusion

I don't mean to suggest that integrated studies can never be carried out successfully, only that they are lumbering beasts by nature, fraught with liabilities, and accomplished with success far less often than their advocates concede. Integrated studies, if they are to be achieved, need to be wary of excessive ambition. And they need to be used sparingly. General education must account for the increasingly fractured nature of the modern university and of the modern student. It should offer a curriculum that binds students' knowledge before it disperses it. And the proponents of integrated studies need to steel themselves against the siren call of Silicon Valley and its conception of group and cross-disciplinary activity as something that can only justify itself in the advancement of technology, social progress, or the student's profession.

If they are going to fulfill rather than distract from the mission of the university, integrated studies still have to believe in the value of knowledge, not just to society, but to the individual human being, and in the value of an education, not just to a student's career, but to the health of that student's soul.